

The Rattler

Sponsored by the Placerita Canyon Nature Center Associates
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Placerita Canyon Nature Center
Over 50 Years of Nature Education

March-April 2024

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Hello Nature Friends,

In February, SCV got drenched by more than 5 inches of rain. For safety reasons, all the parks and Natural Areas got closed for one week. Our rainy season has been successful and hopefully, we will have water in the stream for the next few months. It will be perfect to welcome all the large school groups that we are expecting in March! After a few years adjusting to the new County regulations and the Covid restrictions, we are finally able to welcome school groups to Placerita again.

The Docent training is going along fine, with an outstanding number of 30 new students, and we are very proud of this result. It is perfect timing to remind us about the PCNCA's Mission Statement, "To inspire a passion, awareness and respect for the environment, and to preserve and protect for future generations the history and ecosystem of Placerita Canyon."

All our hard work and efforts are pointing in the right direction.



The Challengers and RuthAnne Murthy

by Pat Coskran

My Challengers hiking group had a special guest presenter today: RuthAnne Murthy. Along the Ecology Trail, she educated us on how indigenous peoples used native plants for food, medicine, shelter, tools and many other purposes (ethnobotany).

Thanks, RuthAnne, for an informative and entertaining program. It is always a joy to see the Challengers so interested and engaged.



Congratulations to Ken Yasukawa

by Helen Sweany

"The passing of the Paul Levine Cup to Ken is a spot-on choice, echoing the spirit of the late Dr. Paul Levine himself. Paul, with all his accolades and a PhD to his name, chose to spend his off-hours hiking with kids and sharing his love for the natural world at Placerita. His fashion statement was a hat and our green Placerita vest adorned with the Placerita patch and his name badge, preferring to go by "Paul" rather than the title of "Dr."

Ken, the recipient of the 2024 Paul Levine Award, seems to follow in these down-to-earth footsteps. Despite his impressive list of degrees, writings, and honors, Ken remains a regular guy, always ready to lend a helping hand.

Known simply as "Ken", not burdened by titles, he leads hikes, bird walks, Community programs, filming and embodies a genuine love for sharing knowledge. Much like Paul, Ken's approachable nature and dedication make him a fitting choice for an award rooted in passion for the natural world and a commitment to teaching."

Ken Yasukawa received the Paul Levine cup from Helen Sweany, on January 27, during the Holiday party from PCNCA. He will keep it for one year, and will then pass it along to a recipient of his choice.



What is a Puddling Station?

By Denny Truger

In the Butterfly Garden, on the dirt trail going to the pond, there's a butterfly puddling station on the right. It was recently revived by our "Gardeners of the Wild." It was overgrown with non-natives and now it's cleaned up and ready for butterflies.

When we started planting our butterfly garden, I was inspired by Paul Levine to make a puddling station in hopes of attracting butterflies to our garden. Butterflies need more than nectar to survive. Though it's rich in sugar, nectar lacks some important nutrients the butterflies need for reproduction. By sipping moisture from mud puddles, butterflies take in salts and minerals from the soil. This behavior is mostly seen in male butterflies.

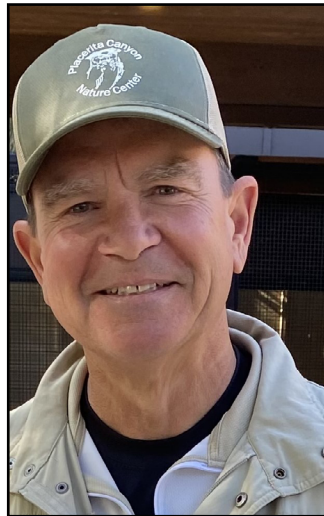


A Rare Winter Visitor

by Nikki Dail

A few days ago, I took advantage of the nice weather between storms for a two-part mission at Placerita Canyon. First was to complete the Los Pinetos trail to top of the saddle, second was to see and photograph a Lewis's Woodpecker, a rare winter visitor that I learned had been seen in this area.

Success on both counts



New Gift Shop Item

by Sue Murachanian

The Gift Shop Team is proud to introduce our new PCNC Trucker Hats!

We have them in two colors. Navy blue with a white back and olive green with a tan back as seen on our docent model Dennis. These Trucker hats are made well and have an adjustable back. They are available for purchase in the PCNC gift shop for \$25.

We look forward to seeing you!
The Gift Shop Team



First Downhill Slider for 2024:

It was a beautiful morning, with RuthAnne Murthy leading the Downhill Sliders along the Canyon Trail. We entered from the back entrance (Walker Ranch, on the east side of the park). We met the team from the LA Conservation Corps (<https://www.lacorps.org/>) who were working on the trail, installing water bars and water drainage just before the next storm, and we thanked them for their hard work. Then it was time for lunch together after our exercise and all the fresh air! The Downhill Sliders meet on the 3rd Monday of the month at 10AM. Thank you, RuthAnne, for making this possible.



Walker Cabin Cleanup

Marc Alva is a docent from the class of 2010, but he had not been active for a few years. He came back to help set up and clean up for the Craft Fair, and worked hard and long at that task.

Then, like a true docent, he started to look for other ways to be helpful. The calendar of events had been sent, and Marc noticed all the large school groups coming to Placerita in March. He knew the Walker cabin needed a good, thorough clean up.

He put himself on a demanding schedule; every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 9.30 to 1.30. He asked for help from the other docents and even proposed a flexible schedule if someone wanted to come at another time. With the Covid disruption and no school groups at the Center, the cabin had been neglected.

Thank you so much Marc, and all the helpers. You made such a big difference with this very energetic and successful Spring cleaning!





Books and Hikes

by Barb Heinzel and Dennis Cain

On January 28th, Books & Hikes kicked off 2024 with an amazing fiction/sci-fi thriller "The Mountain Under the Sea" by Ray Nayler. The Canyon Trail was the perfect backdrop for Dennis, Ellen & Barb to facilitate a fantastic discussion about the characters, technology, communication, nature, octopuses, A.I. and .5s.

B&H Hiker Spotlight

Communicating nature's benefits to others, including children, has been a recurring theme in our Books & Hikes selections. It is also a practice of Laura, one of our regular participants, who brings her daughter Amelia along. Amelia has yet to put forth any strong opinions about the books...but she's being trained to do so, and she is only one year old!

Books & Hikes schedule and book selections include the following:

March 24 – As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock by Dina Gilio-Whitaker

April 28 – A Year in the Woods: Twelve Small Journeys into Nature by Torbjorn Ekelund

Join our Facebook Group Books and Hikes at Placerita Canyon Nature Center (PCNC).

Trail Treasures

By RuthAnne Murthy

Wild Sweet Peas are also called Pacific Peas. They grow only in California and into small areas of Oregon and Baja California. They are perennial herbal vines that grow stems from 3-10 feet long. They are found in areas that range from 0-8000 feet in altitude. They can be found in the Chaparral, Coastal Sage Scrub, and Southern Oak Woodlands. They are often seen along streambeds.

The leaves grow in opposite leaflets along a central stem in even pinnate form. That means it is a compound leaf with opposite pairs. The leaves end with one or more 3-5 inch tendrils that are used to cling onto other plants for support above the ground. The leaves range from ¾ inch to 2 inches in length.

The flowers bloom from February to June. They grow in racemes (groups) from 5 to 12 flowers. The hairy flowers range in color from pale pink to pale lavender. The ½ inch flowers produce many 2 inch seed pods. Unlike the sweet peas found in many gardens, Wild Sweet Peas have little or no fragrance.

Don't let the name fool you! All parts of this plant are toxic to humans and animals and can lead to paralysis if enough is ingested. Bumblebees are known to pollinate Wild Sweet Peas, and butterflies seek out their nectar. They are often found in recent burn areas where their roots spread quickly helping to prevent erosion after a fire. These subtle beauties are there to enjoy and are truly a trail treasure.



Wild Sweet Pea
Lathyrus vestitus



Who is Sima Bernstein?

Some people greet Sima at the Nature Center like a long-lost friend, and others welcome her at the docent training like a new student. Why is that? Sima is both!

She is a proud graduate of the 2009 Docent class, was active at Placerita Canyon for a few years, then moved and we lost touch with her. She is back to the Santa Clarita Valley and decided to reconnect with her old friends and brush up on her nature knowledge. The docent training was starting at just the right time for her to join, and we are delighted to have her on board.

Right away she jumped into new projects and joined the team of Native Plant Renewal and Restoration. They are very active, and that is just the ticket for Sima with her passion for Native plants. She is also active in the Theodore Payne Foundation, where she met Maria Elena Christensen. Those two are like peas in a pod, they share the same interest in native plants and have started a great friendship.

Sima also has an important personal project that she started 3 years ago, tackling her back yard that had been untouched for 40 years! Much clean-up was needed, then installing hardscape before planting new things.

She told me she is very proud of her lovely toyon, her sugar bush, her coyote brush and the many wildflowers that are coming up after the last rain.

We wish you the very best, Sima, and the Nature Center is very glad to have you back.



Docent Enrichment with RuthAnne Murthy.

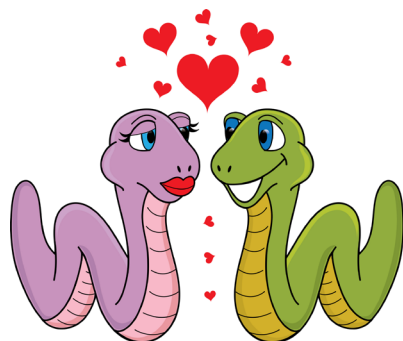
Prime Desert Woodland Preserve
Lancaster.

Let's all thank "darling" Docent RuthAnne Murthy for arranging another fabulous field trip, this time to The Elyze Clifford Interpretive Center - way out amongst the Joshua trees and junipers in the Lancaster desert. Thank you, RuthAnne!

The day was windy, cool, and cloudy when a "baker's dozen" PCNC docents carpooled our way to the Prime Desert Woodland Preserve, where their staffers (docents?) walked us around the Nature Center building and grounds. We learned about the Native American history of the area, as well as the plethora of plants that live and thrive in the desert habitat. The desert is so much more than just sand and sun!

The area is also a treasure trove for rock-hounds. Be careful where you dig, you might end up with a pricey penalty! We walked the well-groomed paths that brought us to a few art installations. The blue antelopes are made from discarded trash (garbage dumping has long been a problem in the desert). The Paleolithic pieces take us way back to the beginning of humankind!

After our strenuous walk (it was a stroll, really), we made our way to the Greenhouse Cafe for lunch. Thanks again, RuthAnne!



Who is Michael Simpson?

My name is Michael Simpson, and I've been an avid, lifelong fan of the natural world. I grew up in Denver, CO in the 1970s and 80s as a latch-key kid with ADHD, which meant that the moment I got home from school, I was glued to the TV. Through TV, I discovered naturalists and nature filmmakers such as Marlin Perkins, Jacques Cousteau, David Bellamy, Sir David Attenborough, Marty Souffer, Joan Embery, Jim Fowler, and Steve Irwin. Their work ignited my curiosity, transfixed my imagination, and I gladly absorbed as much as I could, like a sponge. In addition to TV, I've spent much of my life learning about Nature through school, books and field guides, photography, Scouting, hiking, camping, and fishing. Like California, living in Colorado allowed me to learn and enjoy many outdoor activities and adventures!

Santa Clarita has been my home off and on for over 20 years, and visiting Placerita Canyon has been a delightful part of that residency. I joined the Placerita Docent training program in January of 2024 to learn more and share about the flora and fauna residing in the park with the family and friends I love so much. My wife, Dani, our kids, and I have made many visits to national, state and local museums, zoos, parks, preserves, and nature centers around the country. We've hiked all over LA and Ventura Counties, the Redwood forests above Santa Cruz, and in the Sequoia National Forest. My wife and I are both nature nerds and have been known to start talking about insects at dinner parties.

Participating in the Docent training program has revitalized my youthful curiosity about nature and natural sciences. I was fortunate to have taken High School Biology twice, once each in two different school districts. The Docent course materials, presentations, and hikes remind me so fondly of sitting in Biology class learning everything I could. I always enjoyed researching and writing reports on various flora and fauna--in 9th grade, I even brought my pet Mexican Redleg Tarantula into class for a few weeks and wrote a paper on tarantulas for extra credit.

Apart from music, little has brought me more joy and happiness than being out in Nature observing its majesty. My experiences at Placerita have been most rewarding, and everyone is so kind, knowledgeable, and helpful. I look forward to helping out in any way I can for as long as possible.



My five years with Aiyana

by Denny Truger

Aiyana, a gorgeous 12-year-old Red-tailed Hawk, was forced into early retirement from Falconry due to an injury to her right shoulder. This was most likely due to an injury she received when hunting. She spent approximately one year in rehab after her injury, but unfortunately she never fully recovered from her shoulder trauma. It was determined that she couldn't be released, because she was no longer fully flighted. Ranger Frank was contacted about a beautiful Red-Tailed Hawk that would be a great ambassador at the Nature Center.

So, five years ago Ranger Frank, Recreation Services Supervisor, brought her to the Nature Center where Marietta Ewing, Recreation Services Leader, appropriately renamed her to Aiyana which means "Eternal flower" or "forever blossoming." Dan Duncan and I have been lucky enough to show her off, and teach the park patrons about Red Tailed Hawks.





Native Plant Renewal and Restoration.

This group meets every Thursday from 1:00 pm to 3:00 pm during Docent training, until the end of March. It is led by Robert Grzesiak.

They are often working in different places in the park so they might not be too visible to the casual observer, but the result of the work is impressive. They recently upgraded a lovely area behind the benches, close to the pond area. It is a nice, quiet spot that had been invaded by weeds. The area has been

cleaned up and many plants have been planted. The objective is always to have native plants establish themselves, grow larger and prevent weeds from coming back, breaking the old cycle and promoting restoration to an area. The plants are small right now, but we have great hope for them in the Springtime. It is a very nice spot, with benches close by.

Come check it out! If you are interested in joining this group, please contact Robert. A few new trainees at Placerita joined the team: Brienne Kelly, Zach Alterman, Judie Davis and Bill Rogers.

You can also come with a friend who is eager to work. Bring garden gloves.



87th Anniversary of a Plane Crash above Placerita Canyon

by Ron Kraus

January 12, 2024, was the 87th anniversary of the crash of Western Air Express Flight 7 in the mountains above Placerita Canyon. I took an expedition to the crash site 14 years ago with some friends and we found some debris "consistent with aircraft wreckage" according to an expert.

The flight included some prominent people of the day, including global explorers and wildlife photographers Martin and Osa Johnson and R.T. Anderson, the owner of Pea Soup Anderson's restaurant. Unfortunately, five of the thirteen passengers and crew on board died in the crash.

Walker grandchild and longtime Placerita/Sand Canyon resident George Starbuck remembers, "Three of my uncles were the first ones to the scene, Ray, Charles and Edward Walker. They heard the plane go over and the sound of the crash. It was directly south of the upper house in Placerita. My grandfather drove down to Newhall to inform the sheriff and rescue crew. From what I remember, both of the Johnsons, Africa adventure film makers, were on board. Osa Johnson survived." (personal communication 1-13-2012)



Spiders and Nature Tots

by John Whitaker

Our Nature Tots program continues to be extremely successful. Kids love it. Parents and grandparents love it, and maybe most of all our volunteer docents love doing it!

Our theme in January was the not-so-beloved, but interesting, spider. Our maximum of 22 kids ranging from 3 to 6 years old attended the January program, along with 4 alumni hikers. Our 12 regular docents were pleased to welcome 3 new docents in training.

There was an itsy-bitsy crawling entry by the kids, an educational video, 5 Little Spiders sing-a-long, movement activities, story time, a short hike to look for spider webs in the trees, crafts and science tables. Plus a new feature at the end with games. There was a ring toss on a spider's legs and a spider corn hole game.

A special highlight of this program was a visit by Olivia Miseroy, Regional Park Superintendent 1 from Devil's Punchbowl. She is a spider expert, and the kids were able to see the two different tarantulas she held, up close and personal. Wow! And we did all this in one hour.

Our February 9 theme will be raccoons, and the March 9 theme will be hawks. We welcome all our reader's 3 to 6-year-olds. But please plan to register as soon as possible after the first of the month, to avoid being disappointed, because we reach our maximum limit very quickly.

Hello Spring



The “Postponed” Holiday Party in January:

It was a fantastic success, with about 50 guests who attended. An amazing amount of food was prepared by all the wonderful chefs who came to enjoy a lovely and relaxing evening. The room was decorated by Lori Wolf and Sue Murachanian, and they took us on a virtual camping trip for the party. The tables were covered in animal footprints, leaves, wildflower bouquets and candles.

The camping stop was a big hit. The setup had two folding chairs, a small cheerful table covered in red and white gingham and a backpack (all from Lori’s home) in front of a majestic mountain background. It was a fantastic spot, and many photos were taken in front of the mountains. Thank you for all your work and creativity. What a wonderful and very appropriate theme for a Nature Center.

Jack Levenberg was surprised with a huge birthday cake to celebrate his 84th birthday. Congratulations, Jack!

Ron Kraus always does a wonderful job as a Master of Ceremonies. He reminded us of all the important events from 2023, and we relived the year together listening to those memories.

Helen Sweany passed the Paul Levine cup to Ken Yasukawa. Congratulations, Ken! See Helen’s article in this issue.

Cindy Gold and Fred Seeley gave well-deserved recognition to some docents and one volunteer. See Cindy’s article in this issue.

Ron Kraus took us by surprise, showing us his very first movie done at the Nature Center. It was wonderful to watch...we all looked so young! It was also bittersweet to see the faces of so many of the people we dearly loved who have passed or have moved away. It was even moving to see how the Nature Center itself looked 20 years ago.

Those dinners are always so much fun, a great way for the docents to get together and enjoy each others’ company. The next one will be for the class of 2024 graduation on March 30! Start looking through your recipe cards!

Docent Training 2024

by Ron Kraus

Placerita Canyon’s Docent Training program started up again on January 9th, 2024. When we opened the doors to the nature center that morning we were greeted with a large group of enthusiastic students—over 30 students signed up for the classes!

Finding instructors for all of the classes is always challenging, but we were very successful this year in getting back some of our favorite veteran teachers and some talented newcomers. New to the “faculty” this year are Dana Stangel from Teranga Ranch, who will teach the Mammals Class, Bill Neill teaching Geology, and Sarah Brewer presenting the Indigenous People session. A big thank you is due to our returning instructors: Olivia Miseroy, Ken Yasukawa, Janet Kubler, Cliff & Gabi McLean, Russ Kimura, Frank Hoffman, Cindy Gold, Helen Sweany, Herb Broutt and all of the senior docents who are helping out with the classroom instruction.

Also, a big thanks to Glenda Perl and Sandra Cattell for handling the class administration duties. A lot of work goes into preparing and maintaining the student roster, daily attendance records, instructor handouts and the myriad of other details required to keep the class functioning properly. Sue Murachanian deserves a big pat on the back for keeping the refreshment calendar filled so that no one goes hungry during the breaks. Also, thanks to all who have brought in the goodies. And let’s not forget Jim Crowley who is taking the class pictures for the docent room, as he has done for many years.

Our mentor program is being coordinated by Cindy Gold again this year and all of our new students have been paired up with senior docents to help guide them through the training process. Placerita County Parks staff members have been helpful and supportive of Docent Training—Russ and Frank in providing instruction on several topics and Rene and Monica for set up and other services. In addition, many senior docents have attended the classes on a regular basis to lend a helping hand.

As I’m writing this, we have a large group of students enrolled that appear to be on track to complete the training. Classes will end in March and docent graduation is scheduled for Saturday, March 30. So, mark your calendar and plan on attending the graduation ceremony. It’s open to all docents and a good opportunity to meet the new class!





Meet Jim Crowley

I am a native of Los Angeles, growing up in the Silverlake area. I lived in a “mansion” of a 900 square foot house. My grammar school was St. Francis of Assisi (Don Regis also attended), and then on to St. John Vianney High School. I eventually received a B.S Degree in Police Science Administration from California State University, L.A.

More about the “mansion”it came with a great yard. It was large by most standards, with numerous fruit and citrus trees. It was a great place for me and my friends to discover the wonders of such things as trap door spiders. The house had the rarity of a dug-out basement, which became my discovery craft room.

For years I learned about tools and heavy tinkering, thanks to my dad. He worked as an engineer

at Lockheed; and was a person who could fix anything. And my mother, a farmer from Wisconsin, knew how to make bread and all things grow. My love for nature began there in that yard...lots of exploring with clay soil, bugs and birds, a desert tortoise, the dog, fresh fruit on demand and amazing ferns in a lath house. The Poinsettias grew 20 feet in the air. It gave me an appreciation for nature that I have had ever since.

In college I met my wife of 58 years, Toni, while riding horses on the construction grounds of what is now the L.A. Zoo. We were married in June 1966 and moved to Saugus in 1971. Toni worked for 35 years as a pre-school teacher. Our two sons have careers in Atlanta, Georgia and Austin, Texas. As our children grew, we exposed them to camping, fishing, hiking, and a variety of crafts and hobbies. Placerita Canyon Nature Center Park was one of our places to visit and enjoy. Presently, we are active members of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha Catholic Church.

My work career included 20 years with Sears Roebuck & Co. Later, I applied at Lockheed, and worked there 23 years in the Skunk Works before retirement. My career as a Sr. Subcontract Administrator included buying expensive new “gozintas” for the military. Lockheed Martin was a great place and provided opportunities to work and travel with designers on unique projects bringing new aircraft ideas and systems to the market. I just could not talk about it.

My hobbies include a lifetime of fixing and tinkering with things.... get things to hum and buzz correctly! If I can't fix it, it's not broke... My passion is wood working and some wood carving on the side. Fishing has also been an enduring activity.

After retirement I asked myself why not be a Docent at Placerita Canyon Nature Center? It has everything I like, wrapped up in one package. PCNC motivates me as a Docent, working with other docents sharing their individual talents. And I love to talk to adult visitors who are endlessly amazed at what PCNC offers.

I also have been conducting the Board of Directors elections each June...remember we always need volunteers for the effort. When the Acorn Amphitheatre was built, we needed to purchase audio/visual equipment and figure out a way to store it. I took on that task during the pandemic. Presently, I have been working on the project to replace the tattered taxidermy birds through a bird wood carver in Michigan. Have you seen the Roadrunner?

The children! The best part is working with children who are so happy to visit PCNC, and then try to use that enthusiasm to spark their interest. “Hey mister, what time do they turn on the stream?” and “are there bears here?” Sadly, many children have fears of the natural world. Visiting the PCNC is a first exposure for many of them. I look at that challenge to reassure them they are not in harm's way and show them how we are all connected to each other and with nature, even the ants and mice that like to be in the Center with us.

And I am proud to say I was selected as Volunteer of the year in 2016. Onward! Class of 2010!

2023 Docent Recognition Awards

By Cindy Gold

Congratulations for earning a 2023 Recognition Award!

Ellen Coleman, Dennis Cain, Barb Heinzl, and Jessica Grosh received awards for creating a new program called Books and Hikes. They showed lots of initiative and creativity by combining the love of reading with a passion for nature and hiking. They organize a monthly hike where hiker/bookies can walk the trails and discuss a pre-selected book that has nature themes. It has turned into a popular activity. You can register at: booksandhikes@placerita.org.

For many years **Nikki Dail** has been a master at keeping our docent community well-informed. Conscientious and organized, she sends out emails to ensure we know about PCN-

CA opportunities, activities and other important issues. Nikki also is an avid world traveler and shares her adventures through entertaining and informative presentations for our Community Education Series.

Robert Grzesiak is our much respected and hardworking resident botanist at PCNC. He is the fearless leader of the Native Plant Renewal and Restoration Group. Every Thursday he organizes docent volunteers to clear out invasive nonnative plants, and replant areas to recreate and maintain our regional plant ecosystem. Throughout the week you can also see him working in the park gardens in his gardener's wide-brimmed hat. He is a wealth of information about local plants and we're grateful for his dedication to our park flora.

Beth Higby has used her tech skills to create an in-house Calendar of Events to help docents keep track and participate in all the many volunteer activities and opportunities we have at the PCNC. She also is helping manage our website. As a recent docent graduate, she saw a need and jumped right in to help. She's a valuable tech problem-solver.

We also recognized a non-docent volunteer for his hard work and eagerness to help, **Tevon Murachanian**. With a big smile and cooperative manner, Tev steps right in to help set things up, take things down, and "work through the wrinkles" during our activities and events. Volunteering at the Open House, Family Movie Night at the Acorn Theater, and helping with the Gift Shop are just a few of the programs he's worked on. Thank you, Tev!

Predator-proofing Nest Boxes

Ken Yasukawa

Many of us enjoy backyard birding. There are many ways to attract birds to your backyard, including feeders, native plants, and nest boxes. Nest boxes have also been used by ornithologists to study cavity-nesting birds such as House Wrens (*Troglodytes aedon*) and Western Bluebirds (*Sialia mexicana*), which are common here at Placerita.

Field ornithologists like me who study breeding birds spend hours searching for and then checking nests to examine aspects of bird biology such as incubating eggs, brooding and feeding nestlings, and protecting the eggs and nestlings from predators. I know from 39 years of studying Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) in marshes and fields in Indiana, New York, and Wisconsin that most nesting attempts are not successful, and that predators are responsible for most nest failures.

Ornithologists also study cavity-nesting birds in the field. These studies have been aided by the birds' willingness to use nest boxes, which can be placed in convenient locations, checked readily, and equipped with video cameras and electronic recording devices (data loggers). Of course, even nest boxes face the risk of predation, and many of these boxes are equipped with various antipredator devices such as baffles, hole guards, and ways to protect the box itself.

The question that a backyard birder needs to answer is, which of the interventions actually work? Three ornithologists evaluated various methods by compiling the results of many studies and presenting their results in an open-access (available to anyone) publication (Marcus, Hart, and Goodenough 2024). These authors not only tried to see whether each method discouraged predation (they generally did), but also whether each resulted in unintended consequences such as increasing nest building effort, altering the microclimate within the box, reducing feeding rate, and elevating ectoparasite and microbial loads in the nest.

So, what's the answer for backyard birders? The answer, of course, depends on the kind of bird, the kinds of predators, how the predators gain access to the box, and other things. I'll give an example using Western Bluebird nest boxes, which you can buy or build (<https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/>). A wood bluebird box with a hole guard can be purchased online for around \$25. Birders in the UK often recommend using boxes made of woodcrete, which is more durable and more predator-resistant than wood but does have disadvantages including high cost (around \$50 online).

The authors' final conclusion is that further studies of the costs and benefits of approaches, and the nuance involved (including local variation and acknowledging species differences), should make interventions even more effective.

Marcus, J. M., Hart, A. G., and Goodenough, A. E. 2024. Predator-proofing avian nestboxes: A review of interventions, opportunities, and challenges. *Birds* 5(1): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.3390/birds5010001>.



Photo of Frank Hoffman, Recreation Services Supervisor at Placerita, holding a nest box for a Kestrel.



Christmas Bird Count

Ken Yasukawa

Hunters had a tradition of a Christmas hunt in which teams would compete to see who could collect the most quarry. Concern for the decline of many species of birds led ornithologist Frank M. Chapman to propose a Christmas Bird Census for Christmas Day 1900. The original 27 counters surveyed 25 locations (including Pacific Grove, CA) and counted 90 species of birds.

Today birders who want to participate in the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) can sign up on the Audubon website (<https://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count>) to count birds within a specified circle of 15 miles in diameter, and on a particular 24-hour period between Dec. 14 and Jan. 5. CBC data can then be used by ornithologists, conservationists, and

wildlife agencies to assess the health of bird populations across North America. Birders of all skill levels can participate—a beginner will be paired with an expert, and you can even count from home to report the birds that visit your feeder.

I participated 50 years ago in Bloomington, IN, so it seemed like a good time to renew my participation. On Saturday, Dec. 30 Lori Wolfe and I hiked the Ecology, Heritage, and Hillside Trails, as well as part of the Canyon Trail, and used eBird (<https://ebird.org/home>) to record our sightings. We counted 98 birds of 21 species. I then shared our eBird checklist with the Santa Clarita Count Compiler Bobby Walsh. I always enjoy leading the bird walks at Placerita and recording the results on eBird but submitting my count to the 2023 CBC was a special experience.

If you are interested in similar activities, you can also participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/about-great-backyard-bird-count>), which is organized by Audubon, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Birds Canada and takes place on President's Day weekend in February. There is also a North American Breeding Bird Survey (BBS <https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/>), which is a cooperative effort between the U.S. Geological Survey and the Canadian Wildlife Service. Thousands of dedicated BBS participants cover thousands of established roadside routes throughout North America. BBS participants need to be able to identify birds by sight and sound and must complete the BBS Methodology Training Program (<https://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbs/participate/training/>).



Community Education-

Winter Adaptation Presented by Park Superintendents Olivia Miseroy and Jonathan Numer

Helen Sweany is in charge of this program, and she does a wonderful job.

Olivia and Jonathan explained to us that our California winters are mild because of our proximity to the ocean, however animals and plants have developed different techniques to ensure their survival. Or not – and what do we mean by that? In the case

of many insects, their eggs will provide for the next generation.

The program was well attended, and we all had many questions. It was heartwarming to see a few students from the docent training class attend. It is always a great way to learn for all of us.

This Nature Education program takes place at Placerita, every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2PM.



**Ruben Zamora,
a Master of Wood Creations**

The items in our gift shop are ordered from many different sources, but sometimes we have an artist who steps in.

Joe Morelli noticed the wonderful work his brother-in-law could do, so he asked him to design little magnets with our Placerita mascot, OJ, the Great Horned Owl Junior. The next project is a wood butterfly. They can be found in the gift shop.

Thank you both for thinking about Placerita, and providing such special items!



Concern about Joanne Broutt

We have been very concerned about Joanne's recovery. Many people asked for a daily update, and Jack Levenberg faithfully provided that. She was in the hospital for many weeks, and her progress was slow, so we were quite worried. Now she is going home, her situation is improving fast, and things are finally looking up. All our best wishes to Joanne and Herb. Take it easy, both of you!

SPRING SCHEDULE

Books and Hikes: 4th Sunday of the month from 9AM to 10:30AM. The book for March is “As long as the grass grows: The indigenous fight for environmental justice from colonization to Standing Rock” by Dina Gillio-Whitaker. For April “A year in the woods: Twelve small journeys into Nature” by Torbjorn Ekelund. Please register booksandhikes@placerita.org

Bird Walks: 1st Saturday of every month with Rosemarie Regis. 2nd Saturday of every month with Ken Yasukawa. From 8 AM to 10AM, for all levels of birders. Bring binoculars, water, and a field guide.

Blooms of the Season: Learn about native plants with RuthAnne Murthy. 4th Saturday of every month, meet on the patio at 9:30AM for a one-hour stroll. Bring your camera and questions.

Family Nature Walk: Every Saturday from 11AM to noon with Judy McClure. An easy 1-hour walk exploring the natural and cultural history of the area.

Hike with the Downhill Sliders: Downhill Sliders is on the 4th Monday of the month.. Program for docents and friends. Docents, please check your Trails and Nuggets for the latest information.

Placerita Nature Tots: the 2nd Saturday of the month at 9:30AM. For 3-to-6-year-olds. Program lasts 45 minutes to one hour and will involve learning about the environment. To register Nature_tots@placerita.org

Nature Education: Every 3rd Sunday of the month at 2PM, PCNCA provides a free educational program open to the public.

Native Plant Renewal and Restoration: Every Thursday from 1PM to 3PM during docent training, till the end of March. Led by Robert Grzesiak. Bring garden gloves.

OPEN HOUSE will be on Saturday, May 11.

Opening and closing times for Placerita will be: 9AM to 7PM in March and April.

